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Ex-Captive Weir Regrets 'Arms for Hostages' Deal

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Rev. Benjamin Weir, the first American hostage in Lebanon released after White House-approved covert arms shipments began going to Iran, said he regretted the "trading of arms for hostages," calling it a "questionable tactic."

Appearing Friday on the ABC News program "Nightline," Weir said that although "I certainly want to see those [U.S. hostages] that I know released, I would not want to see an escalation of the war between Iran and Iraq as part of that price."

Weir's remarks came as Reagan administration officials attempted to deal with public disclosure of the secret White House program that was opposed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. Begun in 1985, it led to the release of three U.S. hostages held in Lebanon by Islamic Jihad, a group of pro-Iranian terrorists.

The program was exposed last week after the speaker of the Iranian parliament announced that former White House national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane had visited Tehran in September on a secret mission.

In the wake of that disclosure, sources in Washington described covert meetings involving McFarlane and others in the administration that paved the way for Israeli shipments of arms to Iran.

State Department officials who opposed the Iran arms-for-hostages program said privately yesterday that the White House has the responsibility not only to handle public questions about the program but to find a way to explain it to U.S. allies and Arab nations that have cooperated with Washington's public antiterrorism policies.

The arms shipments ran counter to President Reagan's public position that the United States not pay ransom for hostages and to U.S. efforts—noted by Shultz at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers last

month—to stop allied arms shipments to the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which Reagan labeled a terrorist state on July 8, 1985.

"They created this mess, and they have to clean it up," one official said yesterday. He said career diplomats and other officials may use the expected congressional hearings on the Iran program as a forum to disclose what they called questionable White House-directed actions that harmed U.S. foreign policy objectives.

Illustrating the kinds of problems the White House now faces is the question of how administration officials will square past public statements with the covert operation.

Last August, for example, a month when one reported shipment of arms associated with the U.S. hostages reached Iran, Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy, the department's top Mideast expert, told a House subcommittee that the Tehran regime had gained "the strategic initiative" in the six-year-old war with Iraq.

"A victory by a radical Iran would be a major setback for U.S. interests in the region," Murphy told the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East.

Chairing that session was Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.). Last Wednesday, in his capacity as chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Hamilton joined Rep. Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.) in calling on Reagan to provide details of the administration's activities with Iran.

Shultz, who has refused to comment on the program, has been the administration's main spokesman on terrorism. In April 1985, after news reports that the pro-Iranian terrorists might have killed one of the American hostages, Shultz sent a message warning Iran of the consequences of such an action.

Officials familiar with the program said yesterday that the Islamic Jihad, which had been active

against U.S. citizens, had not seized any since the secret program began. They also said that McFarlane's surprise trip to Tehran had been undertaken because the former national security adviser thought that he could establish contacts that might lead to ending the Gulf war and reestablishing U.S.-Iranian relations.

"He didn't understand the Iranians," one government official said yesterday.

Despite the secrecy surrounding the program, there have been hints about its existence.

On Sept. 19, 1985, one day after Reagan announced Weir's release, the president was interviewed by television evangelist Marion G. (Pat) Robertson on the latter's Christian Broadcasting Network.

During that interview, Robertson said "word reached us" that a White House staff member had been sent the day before Weir's release "to Iran to seek the release of the remaining . . . hostages." Robertson asked: "Is there any word on that that might give hope to us?"

Reagan responded: "Well, I can't really talk about what we are doing, because I don't want to do anything that will endanger the others being freed."